



Women and Immigration Reform: A Gendered Analysis

Immigrant women are deeply woven into the social, economic, and cultural fabric of our society. They are our mothers, sisters, spouses, friends, and neighbors. They are students, business owners, and laborers—responsible for raising children and caring for the ill and elderly. Yet, despite the growing numbers of immigrant women in the U.S., their interests and concerns have historically been overlooked in policy discussions around immigration reform.

Immigrant women have generally had fewer opportunities than men to immigrate safely and lawfully to the U.S. Since the earliest days of our immigration laws, many women have had to rely on the sponsorship of male relatives. Despite reforms to our immigration laws over the past few decades that have increased women's access to independent migration opportunities, women remain disproportionately disadvantaged by our immigration system.

Because our current employment based immigration system disproportionately favors male-dominated professions, women have fewer opportunities to apply as principal visa holders, even though immigrant women are nearly as likely to have a bachelor's degree as immigrant men. As a result, immigrant women who wish to come to the U.S. must often rely on an extremely backlogged family based system, in which the waiting period can be a decade or more. What's more, past immigration reform laws have included eligibility thresholds that many women cannot meet. For example, women who work in the home or in the informal economy—such as in the service industry or as caretakers—may not possess the formal documents required to prove their physical presence and employment history in the U.S.

Any effort to make lasting change to our broken immigration system must address the inequities in our current system that disadvantage immigrant women. Future immigration reform must ensure that women are treated fairly and must recognize the value of women's work and their many contributions to our economy, our families and our communities. This fact sheet will highlight why the inclusion of women is instrumental to the long-term success of any comprehensive immigration reform measure.

Immigrant Women are a Major Part of the Overall Immigrant Population

- **Immigrant women now make up 51% of the total immigrant population** in the U.S.¹
- More than **5 million women** currently living in the U.S. are undocumented.²
- In 2011, **55 % of all people obtaining a green card were women.**³

¹United States Census Bureau. 2011 American Community Survey 1- Year Estimates. Selected Characteristics of Native and Foreign- Born Populations. Available at <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/searchresults.xhtml?refresh=t>.

²Hoefler M, Rytina and Baker B. U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2011. March 2012 Available at http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_ill_pe_2011.pdf

- Women comprise **48 % of all refugee arrivals** and **49 % of all asylees**.
- **54% of people who become naturalized citizens of the U.S. are women.**⁴

Immigrant Women Face Disproportionate Obstacles to Lawful Migration

- **Immigrant women are disproportionately affected by the backlogs in the family immigration system.** 70% of all immigrant women attain legal status through family-based visas, compared to 61% of men. While women wait out the visa backlog in their home countries, they are separated from their families—sometimes for decades.⁵
- **Employment-based visas favor men over women by nearly a four to one margin.** The employment-based visa system places a premium on male-dominated fields like engineering and computer science. As a result, nearly three out of four principal employment-based visas go to men, while only one in four goes to women.⁶
- **Disparities in employment visas persist despite the fact that immigrant women are nearly as likely to have bachelor's degrees as immigrant men.** Just over one-quarter (26.4 %) of immigrant women had a bachelor's degree or more education in 2008, compared to 27.9% of immigrant men.⁷

Immigrant Women are Vital to Economic Growth

- **Immigrant women are more likely to start businesses** than their U.S. born counterparts, and now account for **40% of all immigrant business owners in the United States**, often while serving as the predominant caregivers within their families.⁸
- **Immigrant women's labor is indispensable. Women account for 95% of domestic workers**, and in **major cities more than three-fourths of domestic workers are foreign born.**⁹ They provide services to American families like raising our children, caring for our ill and elderly relatives, and facilitating the daily lives of millions of families.
- **Immigrant women make up nearly one-fourth of direct care workers, one of the fastest growing industries in the nation.**¹⁰ By providing daily living assistance to seniors and people

³ Office of Immigration Statistics. 2011 Yearbook of Immigration Statics *available at* http://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2011/ois_yb_2011.pdf

⁴*Id.*

⁵Hoefer M, Rytina and Baker B. U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2011.

⁶ Kelly Jefferys, DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, Characteristic of Employment-Sponsored Legal Permanent Residents: 2004 (October 2005).

⁷ Immigration Policy Center. Immigrant Women in the United States: A Portrait of Demographic Diversity. *Available at* <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/immigrant-women-united-states-portrait-demographic-diversity>

⁸Pearce S Clifford W, Tendon R. Our American Immigrant Entrepreneurs. Immigration Policy Center (December 2011) *available at* http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/docs/Women_Immigrant_Entrepreneurs_120811.pdf

⁹ National Domestic Workers Alliance, Home Economics Report, based on American Community Survey, 2005-2009 5- year sample

¹⁰ Institute for Women's Policy Research. Increasing pathways to Legal Status for Immigrant In-Home Care Workers, *available at* <http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/increasing-pathways-to-legal-status-for-immigrant-in-home-care-workers/>

with disabilities, immigrant women in the care worker industry enable their clients to stay in their homes and their family members to remain employed. The demand for their services is expected to grow as the baby boomer population ages—an **estimated 1.1 million new direct care positions will be created by 2018.**¹¹ Yet, native-born workers in the U.S. are not meeting the growing demands for long-term care. Immigrant women direct care workers are providing invaluable services and will be called on even more in the future to fill the needs of American families.

Immigrant Women are Instrumental to Strong Families & Communities

- **Immigrant women are central to the wellbeing of their families.** Like most U.S. born women, immigrant women make enormous sacrifices for their families. **Only 13% of immigrant women in the U.S. work in professional positions outside of the home, even though 32% of immigrant women interviewed in a New America Media survey worked as professionals in their home countries.**¹² The study concludes, “Women may well be putting devotion to the wellbeing of their families ahead of personal pride in choosing the journey to America.”¹³
- **Immigrant women embrace citizenship and are drivers of integration. 58% of immigrant women surveyed by New America Media stated they felt the strongest in their family about becoming an American citizen.**¹⁴ They encourage their families to learn English, succeed in school and business, pursue naturalization and fulfill their civic responsibilities. **Overall, 84% of the women surveyed want to become citizens, with 90% of female immigrants from Latin American and Arab nations indicating their desire to naturalize.**¹⁵
- **Immigrant women are raising the next generation of Americans.** There are 5.5 million children in the U.S. living in mixed-legal status families. 4.5 million of these children are U.S. citizens.¹⁶ Immigrant mothers, like all mothers, make the choices they do to keep their families together and ensure the safety and wellbeing of their children.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² New America Media, *Women Immigrants: Stewards of the 21st Century Family* (Feb. 2009) available at <http://media.namx.org/images/communications/immwomenexecsummary.pdf>

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ Taylor J. Passel, *Unauthorized Immigrants and Their U.S. Board Children*. Pew Hispanic Center (August 2010)